

# The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events  
impacting the world's financial markets*

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### **WAKING THE SLEEPING GIANT**

**Mark L. Melcher**

Several months ago, in a piece entitled "Three Cheers For Bill," I wrote a lengthy pean to Bill Clinton's skills at political damage control. Among other things, I said that he and his entourage are the "best political operatives this town has seen since the days of Lyndon Johnson." To drive the point home, I added the following.

If Bill Clinton were a member of the Flying Walendas he could, I believe, not only walk across Niagra Falls on a tight rope, without a balancing rod, blindfolded in a snow storm, but he could do it with a gerbil in his pocket.

Even now, almost five years into the Clinton presidency, watching him and his entourage perform their remarkable daily feats of political high jinks, I am still filled with a sense of wonder akin to the morbid fascination I experienced as a young boy when I first went to see the geek perform at a mid-West Fourth of July carnival.

Well, last week he and his team handed in the most stunning public relations performance that I think this town has ever witnessed. Ever! These guys didn't write a new chapter in the "spin" textbook, they demolished the old one and wrote a whole new one from scratch.

Just over a week ago, the nation was informed that highly credible evidence existed that Bill had had a long affair with a White House intern who was young enough to be his daughter, and had lied under oath about it. This came on the heels of testimony by another former White House employee, a Kathleen Willey, that he had subjected her to unsolicited kissing and fondling when she entered his office to ask for a better job. Her detailed description of the encounter is too racy for this or any other family publication.

Virtually every major news organization in the nation covered the story like a blanket. Old time Washington hands were predicting publicly that Bill was likely to be brought down, that his

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presidency was all but over. Today, a little over a week later, the legal aspects of the case are in limbo, and his approval ratings are at an all-time high.

Now, as regular readers know, I am not a fan of Bill's policies, or of his character. But I must say, watching him handle scandal is like watching a great athlete perform. He has it all. His tactical skills are flawless. His understanding of the American public is phenomenal. And the loyalty he educes from his family and close associates is something to behold. More importantly, it appears that he has completely conquered shame, in much the same way that great athletes conquer pain.

Regarding this last point, and to stay with the sports metaphor for a moment longer, I think it is interesting to note that all truly great athletes make enormous personal sacrifices for their sport. And this leads me to wonder what horrible sacrifices Bill Clinton must have made, both spiritually and practically, in order to be able to stand so proudly before the American public under such circumstances.

On the tactical front, it was a stroke of genius to have Janet Reno hand the entire legal matter over to Independent Counsel Ken Starr. As I said last week, Starr's operations have been marked from its beginning by ineptness, stupidity and prosecutorial timidity, while the Jones lawyers have been aggressive and smart.

As it turned out, this tactic worked out even better than the White House could have imagined. Not only did Starr bungle his dealings with Monica Lewinsky, as expected, but last week a court in Little Rock barred the Jones lawyers from using the Lewinsky case at all. This was not just a blow to the Jones case, but it hurt Starr's already anemic efforts as well, since it may prevent him from using Lewinsky's sworn statement that she had not had a fling with Bill as leverage to gain her cooperation.

The frosting on the cake is that with Starr in charge, Bill, Hillary and White House spin doctors can now decline to make any comments on the case, "because it is under investigation by Ken Starr." In a remarkable display of how far this crust of silence extends, Janet Reno declined to answer a 6th grade student's question about the scandal because, she said, "it's an independent counsel matter." Cheeky little brat, anyway!

But, in my opinion, it was the way Bill handled his family and colleagues that turned his actions into a true *tour de force* of damage control. In politics, as in war, leadership is put the supreme test when the time comes to ask the foot soldiers to march into the breach. And last week, Bill's soldiers did it, and did it big.

"Half a league, half a league, half a league onward," in the face of overwhelming evidence that "someone had blundered," hordes of them rode forth to state publicly, "while all the world wondered," that they firmly believed the White House story.

In my opinion, one of the most remarkable images from the entire five years of the Clinton administration occurred when senior members of his cabinet were assembled on the darkest day of the scandal and, in a scene that was eerily reminiscent of a "History Channel" documentary

showing frightened old Bolsheviks lined up to offer loyalty oaths to Joseph Stalin during the purges, they stepped forward, grim-faced and stoic, to publicly state to the TV cameras, and therefore to the nation, their belief that Bill was "telling the truth."

Cannon to the right of them, Cannon to the left of them, Cannon behind them, Volleyed and thundered. . . Theirs not to make reply, Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do and die. . .

Better yet, here is a married man who, evidence strongly suggests, is involved with a young girl who works for him. This same guy is about to stand trial for dropping his pants in front of another former employee. And another employee has just filed a deposition citing him for similarly assaulting her, while the affair with the young girl was allegedly in high gear. And his wife, like Lady Macbeth crying "give me the daggers," goes on national television to blame a "vast right wing conspiracy" for his troubles.

This may not have been classy, but to a whole lot of married men, guzzling their Budweisers and scratching their bellies, it was better than a triple play, a hat trick, and 105-yard touchdown run, all in one. Trust me on this, as they say.

What really amazed Republicans was that the nation's feminists liked it too. How could this be, they asked themselves, given the outrage the feminists expressed at Clarence Thomas and Bob Packwood. Well, pundit after pundit last week said that it all boils down to the fact that Bill is on the correct side of "women's issues," most especially the right to abortion. As for his alleged philandering; well, their attitude was that Republicans do it too, so why not go with the guy who supports "pro-women policies."

Author Phyllis Chesler, who I believe provides the best window of all into the murky world of radical feminism, put it this way on CNN last week: "Republicans and conservatives in office abandon their wives, don't pay child support, hire prostituted women for sexual servicing, commit incest, abandon families, and in addition have anti-women policies."

The CATO Institute's Jennifer Grossman asked Chesler if she didn't think that women "have a shared interest in husbands being faithful and husbands telling the truth to them," to which Chesler shot back, "Ah, but not at the price of subordinating women under one Christian god and one husband in the household." So there you have it.

What no one on that, or any other show I saw, noted was that a whole lot of men also favor women's right to unrestricted access to abortion, because it frees them from responsibility for their sexual actions. More importantly, it lowers many of the traditional barriers to frequent, casual sexual encounters. Trust me on this one too.

The bottom line on all of this is that Bill doesn't just get credit for winning a tactical battle last week. In my opinion, he can also take considerable pride in having helped create the social environment that made this victory possible.

Why do I say this? Well, I believe that Bill's continued popularity, despite what were once almost universally considered "character flaws," cannot be properly understood unless it is viewed as one of the fruits of a highly successful, 35-year-long assault on America's traditional moral and ethical standards and on its traditional customs and mores. And it cannot be denied that Bill, and Hillary too, have been important warriors in this effort, working their way up from simple foot soldiers to the ranks of the movement's most important generals today.

It has become accepted wisdom among the talking heads on television that Bill's situation is analogous to that of Jack Kennedy, who was also known to be promiscuous. What's the big deal, they ask? The public didn't care then and it doesn't care today. Nothing has changed.

But that is hogwash. As Father John Neuhaus pointed out in the March 1997 issue of *First Things*, "a sympathetic press hushed up John F. Kennedy's womanizing precisely because it was assumed that, were it known, it would be politically deadly."

The fact is this nation has changed dramatically in the past 35 years. It is understandable that many of the talking heads on TV don't know this, since they are too young to remember the Kennedy years, and very few probably have little more than a smattering of knowledge of American history.

But surely Bill and Hillary know that things have changed. And not only that, they know why things have changed. Indeed, their entire adult lives have been devoted to the movement that is behind this change.

Whether Mrs. Clinton knows it or not, there is no "vast right wing conspiracy" to get her husband, in the literal sense. But there are indeed a great many powerful organizations and influential individuals who view the moral, ethical and legal chaos that has marked the Clinton years, and the public's blasé reaction to it all, as a wake up call.

There are indeed a vast and growing number of people who are deeply concerned that, in the words of T.S. Eliot, the philosophy represented by the Clintons is "destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans."

On a more practical level, there are indeed a vast number of people who resent being afraid to have their children watch the evening news because they don't want to have to explain about the connection between the President of the United States and soiled dresses and oral sex.

There are indeed a vast number of people who are not comfortable following the advice of the enlightened Debra Haffner, who is President of something called the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. Haffner happily says that parents should view the latest Clinton sex scandal as a "teachable moment," a chance to explain to their eight-year-old, when he asks about oral sex, that "it's something some grownups like to do to show each other caring and pleasure."

There are indeed a vast number of people who don't like the moral gibberish that is being taught to their children in the public schools under such rubrics as "multiculturalism" and "tolerance."

The five-year-old son of a good friend of mine came home from public school recently and explained to his father that his teacher had taught them that day that people should not judge or criticize any of the actions of other individuals because we all must "live in harmony."

Now no conservative would argue that tolerance is not good. But conservatives believe that tolerance is closely allied to the concept of forgiveness, which is itself inseparable from the concept of "right" and "wrong." Conservatives believe that the idea that we all must "live in harmony," divorced from a belief system that distinguishes between good and evil, will eventually create a society that is not only inharmonious, but socially chaotic and economically troubled, as parts of Europe are today.

Last week, CNN's Jeanne Meserve interviewed Jack Valenti, a former aid to President Johnson and now the President of the Motion Picture Association of America. Valenti said that he had just returned from a trip to Europe where he found "a curiously contradictory attitude," which could be summed up by what one "government minister" told him. Valenti explained, as follows.

He said, you know, I don't understand you Americans. He said, most of the presidents and prime ministers of Europe today are in deep trouble; a stagnant economy, no job growth, high unemployment, disturbing and discontented populations. He said and there is America; low interests, I mean, low inflation, full employment, the most robust economy in the world.

President Clinton is the most impressive leader in the world. All of the European countries think he's just wonderful as a great political captain, and in spite of all this, you're at the zenith of your power in the summertime of your existence and you want to throw your president out. He said you Americans must be mad.

Valenti, of course, was in agreement with this "European minister," as was, by all appearances, Ms. Meserve. It apparently never occurred to either that the reason that Europe is in trouble, and the United States is, as Valenti put it, still a "noble and splendid land," is that the people in Europe have ignored the lax moral behavior of their leaders for so long that their leaders no longer have the moral authority to lead.

I don't know where all this will end. But I think it is important for everyone to understand as events unfold that the controversy over Bill's fate is but a small scene in a great morality play; a play that has been on stage for some 35 years, and that is set against an historic backdrop that dates to the clash between the 18th century French Jacobins, who believed that the nobleness of their venture and their own self-proclaimed righteousness justified any crime, and those, such as Burke, who believed that liberty cannot be sustained without the rule of law. Burke predicted that citizens led by such leaders as the murderous Jacobins would soon see that:

[C]riminal means once tolerated are soon preferred. They present a shorter cut to the object than through the highway of the moral virtues. Justifying perfidy and murder for public

benefit, public benefit would soon become the pretext, and perfidy and murder the end; until rapacity, malice, revenge, and fear more dreadful than revenge, could satiate their insatiable appetites. Such must be the consequences of losing in the splendor of these triumphs of the rights of men, all natural sense of wrong and right.

Bill and Hillary can be justly pleased that they won a public relations victory last week. And they can take comfort in the fact that Ken Starr is a weak adversary.

But I think that they cannot help but be concerned that they have awakened a sleeping giant within the American body politic, and that while there is no "vast right wing conspiracy" against them, there is indeed a large and growing group of individuals who are uniting in protest and in fear that the political and moral philosophy that the Clintons represent is a threat to traditional American concepts of liberty and the rule of law.

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